

Bored by books? Try living history

I cringed when I read recently about the Indiana Board of Education's review of social studies texts for state schools. According to some board members, these books are boring, dull, "uninspirational" and "unfit for students," as reported in the Oct. 2 story by The Star's Andy Gammill ("School Board balks at boring textbooks").

The board decided to reject the entire list of texts but later issued a warning to schools about their "monotonous" content.

I'm sure we've all experienced uninspiring textbooks in our school days, and survived with our interest in learning intact. But I believe parents,



Rosenthal

teachers and school administrators will agree on one point: It's hard to stimulate kids' curiosity today and boring books don't help. Those of us in the history profession are particularly worried that students will assume that if history books are boring, history is itself boring.

My worries were heightened one recent day when I happened to hear disc jockeys on the North Central High School radio station bantering. They wondered if there was ever a time in America's history when politics was not so acrimonious. One disc jockey said, "I think we used to have just one party around the 1800s." The other disc jockey quipped, "Man, I don't know because I just tune out in social studies class."

One antidote for the boring textbook may be a hands-on learning experience. As William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet, said, "Education is not filling a bucket, it's lighting a fire." That's what we try to do every day at Conner Prairie, Central Indiana's leading interactive museum for Hoosier history.

The vision of Eli Lilly, our founder, called for Conner Prairie to serve as a place that connects people to history in ways that books can't. Our exhibits — including 1823 Conner House, 1836 Prairietown, 1886 Liberty Corner, and the proposed 1859 Balloon Voyage, which will celebrate Indiana's rich aviation heritage in 2009 — immerse visitors in another time and offer hands-on experiences. The 1859 Balloon Voyage exhibit, based on the first airmail delivery in the world, places the visitor in 1859 in Lafayette, Ind. Not only does it tell the story, but it actually allows visitors to take off in a 19th century-style tethered balloon.

Why does interactive learning matter? Simply put, I believe it's one way we can excite students about education in all disciplines — especially history. Today, more than ever, hands-on learning can light the fire for learning.

That's why it matters. There's still plenty of room for books and other printed materials in the classroom and elsewhere. But museums like Conner Prairie offer learning opportunities that are exciting and inspirational for students of all ages. And that's something every parent, teacher and school administrator can agree on.

★ Rosenthal is president and CEO of Conner Prairie.